

## This is for the Birds – A Plan for All Seasons

by Kate O’Lenic

Gardens do so much more than produce beautiful flowers and delicious vegetables. They have the potential to be a great benefit to birds all year long. As gardeners, we can boost the benefits for birds with a little planning ahead. Two things to remember when buying and caring for plants: make sure plants are pesticide-free. Some growers continue to treat plants with pesticides that taint insects and can harm birds if they consume those insects. Also, use pesticides on plants only as a last resort.

Plants that are native to our area help birds several ways. Depending on the plant, it can provide nectar, berries, fruit, seeds, and nuts. Plants can also attract insects for birds to feed on and offer shelter and nesting sites. There are so many ways we gardeners can help our feathered friends.

We think of hummingbirds as nectar-loving avians. And they certainly do love to sip from those beautiful flowers. By planting flowers to provide a constant supply of nectar from spring to fall, you can greatly improve your chances of attracting these remarkable creatures. Here are some examples:

**Spring:** Small’s beardtongue (*Penstemon smallii*), fire pink (*Silene virginica*), Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*), columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), wild blue phlox (*Phlox divaricate*), red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), clump verbena (*Verbena canadensis*)

**Summer:** wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), summer phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), clump verbena (*Verbena canadensis*)

**Fall:** wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*) an annual flower that readily self-seeds, blue sage (*Salvia azurea*), clump verbena (*Verbena canadensis*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*)

A few great examples of plants to consider for berry production include serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillate*), and beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) which provide berries in the fall and early winter. The beautiful American Mountain Ash tree (*Sorbus americana*) is a prolific producer of bright orange-red berries from September to October. Berries also provide an extra dash of color to the fall and winter landscape.

Many flowering native plants produce seeds that birds love to feast on. Just leave the seed heads in place and the birds will thank you. Asters (*Sympyotrichum*) are a favorite for seeds in the fall, black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida* or *R. hirta*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), and one of my favorites, blue mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*) all produce seeds that birds love.

The fruit-producing vine, passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*), is another food source that adds an exotic touch to gardens. Its blooms show off in summer and the fruit is ripe in late summer/fall.

Native fruit trees are also a great source of nutrition for birds. Fruits are called soft-mast food because they contain less fat than nuts, as discussed below. Trees include dogwood (*Cornus sp.*), paw paw (*Asimina triloba*) producing fruit August-October, wild plum (*Prunus americana*) with fruit ripe in late summer, and red mulberry (*Morus rubra*) with fruit ready in May-June.

**NUTS!** A number of bird species appreciate nuts and acorns to help them survive the winter months. Hard mast is the term used for these fat-rich foods. In Tennessee, walnuts (*Juglans nigra*), hickories (*Carya sp.*), American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), and oaks (*Quercus sp.*) are the predominant hard mast producers.

The long-lived fruit and nut trees, and evergreens also provide shelter and nesting sites for birds. Pines (*Pinus sp.*), white spruce (*Thuja occidentalis*), magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) and Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) are a few of the evergreens that provide crucial winter shelter, cover from predators, and nesting sites.

These are just a few of the many ways gardeners can grow beyond the flower bed or garden plot. Check out the resources below for more ideas and all the details you need to be a champion of all creatures great and small.

For further information about the plants mentioned in this report, go to [https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find\\_a\\_plant/](https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find_a_plant/)

### **How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

*The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.*

### **Resources**

<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/design/gardening-with-wildlife/bird-friendly-plants.html>

<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/design/types-of-gardens/hummingbird-gardens.html>

<https://marylandgrows.umd.edu/2021/10/27/qa-can-you-recommend-plants-that-provide-food-for-birds/>

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W305.pdf> “Hummingbird gardening in Tennessee”

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP530.pdf> “Urban Trees for Wildlife”

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/smallfarms/wildlife-shelters-brush-piles-and-predator-excluders>